



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Guinea-Bissau

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was little change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. However, in March 2005, the Government prohibited Ahmadiya activity in the country.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, a dispute between local Muslims and the Ahmadiya group in the city of Gabu resulted in injuries to four Ahmadiya members.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 13,948 square miles, and its population is approximately 1,388,000. An estimated 38 to 45 percent of the population is Muslim; and between 5 and 13 percent is Christian. The remainder of the population follows traditional indigenous or animist religious practices. There are few atheists.

Christians belong to a number of groups, including the Roman Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations. Christians are concentrated in Bissau and other large towns. Islam is practiced most widely by the Fula and Mandinka ethnic groups, and Muslims generally live in the north and northeast. Practitioners of traditional religions inhabit the remainder of the country. Virtually all Muslims are Sunni. The Ahmadiya are not confined to any particular geographic region. Their numbers are extremely small; there is no reliable data on number of adherents. With the 2005 banning of Ahmadiya activities, followers have mostly returned to practicing the same form of Sunni Islam that other Muslims in the country practice.

Missionaries from numerous Christian denominations long have been active, and they operate in the country without restriction.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There is no state religion. Members of all major faiths are represented in the National Assembly.

Christmas is the only religious holy day considered a national holiday.

The Government requires that religious groups be licensed and has reportedly not refused any applications. There were no reports that new applications were made during the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, in March 2005, following a dispute in the previous month between Muslims and members of the Ahmadiya group in the eastern city of Gabu, the Government prohibited Ahmadiya activity, contending that Ahmadiya activities, including the group's practice of paying locals to

attend services, were disruptive. In 2003, the Ahmadiya, expelled from the country in 2001, had been permitted to return after the Government determined that former President Yala's decision to banish them had been an illegal breach of due process.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Society is generally tolerant on religious matters; however, a high illiteracy rate leaves many easily susceptible to misinformation and manipulation by local leaders and others.

In February 2005, a dispute between local Muslims and the Ahmadiya group in the city of Gabu resulted in injuries to four Ahmadiya members before police intervened.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Since there is no U.S. Embassy in Bissau, the capital, the U.S. Embassy in Dakar, Senegal, handled all official contact with the country.

The Embassy maintained relations with leaders of major religious organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and missionary groups in the country, including the National Islamic Council and the Catholic bishops. Since 2003, the Embassy has hosted an annual Iftar dinner in Bissau for Muslim leaders. The Embassy continued to seek opportunities to further understanding of religious freedom in the United States through public diplomacy programs, such as the International Visitors Program and dissemination of publications promoting tolerance.

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